Chapter 4: The Teacher as Trickster

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Chapter 4

The Teacher as Trickster

Fools, they are the only nation
Worth men's envy or admiration...

Ben Jonson, *Volpone*, Act 1: Sc. 1.ll. 156–57 (1962 and 1971)

Introduction

As we turn from the exploration of laughter as a generic quality of liminal education to a more specific incarnation in the person of the teacher, some of the themes of ambiguity, inversion and dissenus discussed there are here taken up again and further developed. Specifically, attention is turned on the person of the teacher as one who needs to embody some of the characteristics of laughter in order to open up the rich complexity of the world to students. Here and there the discussion on laughter touched explicitly on the character of the fool or trickster. Now I wish to suggest that the teacher who wishes to maintain discursive openness without being prey to an overtly political approach to education may don the mantle of the trickster. This is a particularly interesting and evocative, though somewhat ambiguous, metaphor for the teacher. In order to make sense of such a challenging metaphor it is first necessary to understand something of the identity and role of the teacher in late-industrial polities. As a child growing up in a small Northern Irish village, I had a vague sense of the local teacher as a kind of trinitarian figure, an earthly manifestation of a triune God that also included the clergyman and the general practitioner. His role was reasonably unambiguous—he was a learned man, an intellectual (however

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limited he might have been in actuality). No doubt this is a very peculiarly romanticised view of village life and the ruling pantheon but, even with its romantic overtones, it hints at something long gone and largely forgotten—the teacher as community leader, as someone who represented, in some meaningful way, the community's more noble aspirations and someone whose role and person were not subject to a continually negative barrage of government and media disapproval. Paradoxically, in late-industrial polities the changes in attitude towards teachers have their roots, at least partially in quite ancient anxieties about the liminal state of late childhood/early adolescence. But equally, these changes are also a consequence of the discursive closure about the purposes of education that has been transmuted into a technocratic view of the teacher (see Carr and Hartnett 1996). The opening section of this chapter attempts to understand the interplay between some of these forces and their consequences for our image of the teacher. In the middle sections I have attempted a brief archaeology of the trickster as an archetype metaphor that is simultaneously one of the most ancient in the world of human being and yet, refreshingly contemporary. The trickster is one who, in the patterns of myth, legend and folklore narrative, moves between symbolic categories of being and action, changing shape and identity in order to expose and redress various deep-seated human follies. He is related to the clown or fool and, like them, inhabits a borderland between different worlds or different conceptions of the world and its experiential content. He is frequently a religious or quasi-religious figure who serves a ritualised function in mocking and challenging the forces of the status quo. Of course, it was unlikely, particularly in small village life, that the teacher would have been seen as one who mocked and challenged in this way though, as I discuss briefly in the next section, she always incipiently carried some of these possibilities. The penultimate section attempts to explore the peculiarly Celtic inflections of the trickster, most especially in the person and works of the Irish novelist, Flann O'Brien, who sheds light on a neglected aspect of the moral role of the teacher in the educational systems of the British Isles and, I think, more widely.

The final section takes up this notion of the trickster as a metaphor that may be used to signpost a different, liminal way of making sense of the role and person of the teacher. In doing so, it attempts to uncover this particular, moral conception of the role of the teacher as one duty-bound to a certain discursive openness that runs counter to the prevailing impulses of government and corporation. Interestingly, the trickster's moral responsibility is primarily to the students and, through them, to society. This notion of accountability largely runs counter to the late-industrial view of the teacher as one who is, before everything else responsible, to society seen

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largely as an economic unit(y). The use of the trickster is also important as a vehicle that repairs that rupture with our own history that has impoverished the storehouse of our collective imagination with respect to the role of the teacher.

Who Is a Teacher?

Across late-industrial societies the notion of an expert has been subjected to profound challenge. From medicine to law, politics to economics the expert appears to be under increased scrutiny.[1] At least in recent times, teaching seems to have been particularly vulnerable to this trend, perhaps more so than other comparable occupations. There are a number of reasons for this vulnerability, some of them fairly prosaic, such as relative economic weakness of teaching as a white-collar occupation. However, there are yet more interesting reasons. These include the openness of its sphere of activity (for all, at some stage of their lives, see and experience the teacher *at work*), the focus of the work (children and adolescents), and the kinds of questions that arise about the exact nature of the expertise a teacher brings to her work. It is the last two of these that are of most interest here, especially given the concern to develop a liminal metaphor of the teacher.

Earlier we reflected on the discrete nature of the school child as one who is, *no longer*, but equally, *not quite yet.* Childhood is an in-between stage and those institutions devoted to this stage partake in that in-betweeness. The liminal status of schooling derives from the liminal condition of childhood and those who enter this world are, in some senses, occupationally separated from the adult world. There are, of course, other occupations where people work with children and adolescents, such as child law and paediatrics, but in such cases the qualifications are gained in the generic field prior to specialisation. Teachers, on the other hand, are expressly qualified (whatever might be meant by that) in teaching children, and even then, in teaching them at particular stages. This brings teachers into the world of the child in a manner quite different from that of a child lawyer or a paediatrician. Teachers occupationally live in the world *of* children, whereas lawyers and paediatricians, respectively, practice law and medicine with respect *to* children. A teacher doesn't practice teaching with respect to children. A teacher teaches children![2] One consequence of the very particular nature of teaching children is that teachers are themselves positioned in the liminal zone of childhood and adolescence in a way that is not the same for lawyer or paediatrician. This liminal location, in common with other liminal states, is suffused with ambiguity and, in turn, it attracts deeply ambiguous responses

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from adults. This ambiguity manifests itself in a variety of ways. First, on the one hand we may wish to qualify the kind of responsibility that may reasonably be assigned to children for their actions (see Schapiro 1999) while on the other, we have come to regard them as independently responsible consumers of goods and services in their own *sui generis* market. Second, as we have already seen, the period of schooling has been inexorably extended while the concerns and expectations of adult life have burrowed down to the earliest years of childhood. Third, there is a perception that childhood is a state that adults have grown out of, or gone beyond. It is a world they associate with immaturity as well as a certain unruliness. Yet simultaneously, an edifice of imagined innocence has been erected around it. Perhaps most importantly here, teachers themselves are seen to occupy this ambiguous space and appear to attract very mixed reactions from their fellow citizens. So it is that the populist criticism often heard of teachers is that, they do not live in the real world.

Teaching is prey to other significant ambiguities about its occupational status in the polity; indeed, teachers themselves are frequently implicated in the cultivation of some of this ambiguity. In his analysis of some of the ambiguities that surround the occupational identity of teachers, Carr (2003a) delineates a number of important sources of the cloudiness that envelops teaching as an occupation. I wish to refer to only two of these here. First, he points out in some detail that teaching appears to fall between a number of occupational definitions because, on the one hand, it is clearly not a skills-based trade. Yet, on the other, it is not immediately apparent that it is to be seen as a profession in the way that law and medicine are, given that it does not obviously and irrefutably demand a particular specialised study of some field of knowledge before the practice of teaching begins. The study of a variety of social and theoretical sciences notwithstanding, it is not obvious that I have to be a competent psychologist or philosopher in order to be an effective teacher. Indeed, as a student teacher I well remember a particular fellow student, let's call him Matthew, who was a very successful examinee across a range of theoretical considerations but who, on going out on his second-year practicum, was so practically incompetent that he called his supervisor to the school on the grounds that he had an emergency. When the unfortunate tutor arrived on the scene, she discovered that Matthew's anxieties were somewhat overblown. The teaching practice rubrics required that students complete specific parts of their teaching folder in red ink. Matthew didn't have a red pen and was in a state of high anxiety, not knowing what to do. On another occasion he threw a tape recorder out of a sixth-floor window because he couldn't get it to work. Clearly, Matthew's difficulties were more significant than the absence of the red pen, but they

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were not about his intellectual capacities. Even where a doctor or lawyer is bereft of all interpersonal skills we would still want to suggest that they may continue to practise their profession with the proviso that they retain the capacity to diagnose or analyse the situation appropriately and prescribe accordingly. But our attitude towards teachers in this respect might be somewhat different. Indeed, Matthew was required to pursue an alternative career that did not demand an awareness of the psychological, developmental and communicative needs of those with whom he was working. In some important ways teaching eludes a neat professional categorisation.

The second issue to which Carr draws our attention, which is germane to the discussion here, is the extent to which teachers can or should control their own occupational arrangements. Doctors and lawyers through their professional bodies have managed to control not only their professional practices but, more importantly, also the normative expectations and conditions under which they work. Teachers appear not to have similar oversight and control over their own practices and more importantly over the normative conditions under which they work. Nor, Carr argues, is it self-evident that they should have. "It may well be denied," he argues,

> "that teaching is a professional practice of the kind in which it is proper to involve practitioners in debates and decisions about the aims of education or the proper direction of educational policy. In a public arena in which such other social agencies as parents, politicians or employers are important stakeholders, and in which practitioners are (largely in consequence) required to operate in accordance with centrally or officially prescribed policy decisions about management, discipline, curriculum and pedagogy, it might be held that wider normative reflection upon policy is not the legitimate business of teachers, and that their role is more that of the efficient technical transmission of what is considered to be socially and economically useful by those to whom they are politically (albeit democratically) accountable." (Carr 2003a, 41f)

However, he does go on to argue that such a truncated conception of teaching, while popular in certain right-of-centre political views, may both be misconceived and possibly dangerous. Carr's view needs a little modification here. I take it that Carr does not intend to imply that professions like medicine and law are not subject to disciplinary practices and discursive permissibility, but that it is unlikely that lawyers and doctors would not have a significant input into these issues. He also, I think, wrongly assigns the phenomenon of professional discursive closure to the right-of-centre phenomenon.

Increasingly, governments of both the left and the right in a number of liberal democracies have legislated for central government scrutiny, articulation and control of the outcomes of teacher training programmes. This increase in the surveillance and control of programmes and courses for the

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preparation of teachers has come about for a number of reasons and certainly in Britain can be traced back to the "Great Education Debate" of the late 1970s, instituted by then British Prime Minster James Callaghan in his now famous "Ruskin College" speech (see Lawrence 1992, 80). At that time, and unwaveringly ever since, there was a perception in the corridors of power that the decline in the economic fortunes of Britain were at least partly attributable to failures in education, which were in turn laid at the door of teachers. There is the further reason, I think, that the many and deeply fissured ambiguities that surround and suffuse adult attitudes towards childhood/adolescence in general, and schools in particular, are apt to be also associated with teachers and teaching.

The note of ambiguity, which vibrates through school education, together with the increasing discursive collusion between government and corporation, has resulted in the evolution of increasingly doctrinaire perceptions of and policies towards teaching and teachers. Across liberal democracies a technicist model of the teacher has entered the mainstream. This model teacher is, above everything (putatively, at least), technically competent. In the course of her training[3] she has acquired a range of skills that can allegedly be assessed by some kind of objective criteria (see Blake et al. 1998). In Britain, the somewhat discredited notion of *competences* in teacher education has been replaced with *benchmarks* (Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education 2000), but such a change "misses the point." It still retains the notion that being a good teacher is largely a matter of the acquisition of particular skills[4] together with the capacity to "hit the mark." The teacher then is to be regarded as part of a functional, putatively rational system that is intended to deliver certain kinds of measurable outcomes. As with education in general, the role of the teacher, at every level, has been subject to a range of strategies, the net result of which has been the deepening of the drive towards discursive closure. These strategies revolve around the increasing narrowing of not only the teachers' remit but also her practices and pedagogies. This tightening of the focus may be seen as contiguous with a growth in the apparatus of control and regulation focused on increased productivity (Merson 2000); the development of market and compliance models of Total Quality Management (Gewirtz 2000) and a central governmentally controlled framework and set of practices to train school principals and other potential leaders (Smith 2002).

Drawing on its frames of reference, each of these developments carries the genes of economic rationalism and, in yet one more way, demonstrates the lack of both the capacity and capability to nurture alternative linguistic forms for the development of what is a deeply human engagement. These hegemonising tendencies are crystallised in a British Government initiative

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to standardise leadership practices through the insistence that all university programmes on school leadership use national benchmarks and design their courses in accordance with those of the centrally controlled "College for School Leadership." In his analysis of this initiative, Smith (ibid) lays bare both the desire to cultivate a deeply centralised orthodoxy as to what is to count as good leadership. What counts as good leadership is the efficient enactment of government policies, irrespective of (1) their efficacy or (2) their morality. As a conduit for policy decisions made at another level, the headteacher is increasingly divorced from her colleagues. The discursive metaphors that shape her role and professional identity are increasingly drawn from the world of business, industry and the economy. She stands apart as a manager, whose success is determined by the achievement of targets established elsewhere. Until relatively recently, and despite the occasional minor despot, the notion of headteacher or principal was that they were teachers first and foremost. After all, the headteacher was deemed by colleagues to be "one of us." This situation is not without its ironies given that "behind the rhetoric of modern management lies the architecture of hierarchical management adopting processes that are redolent of very traditional, authoritarian and Taylorist regimes" (Merson 2000, 165).

The gradual but substantial shift in the language that bathes the role of the teacher in the tincture of an economic-managerial discourse is increasingly normalised. Those who do not see their role as some variant of the manager—school manager, curriculum manager, learning manager—are unlikely to experience much career progression. As I have suggested earlier, in late-industrial societies it would be entirely inappropriate to see education as having no connection with economic considerations.[5] Young men and women undoubtedly wish to work and to be successful. But, to reiterate a point made throughout this study, the question is one of priority. From the perspective of the liberal-democratic state, success in the workplace is to be measured against its contribution to the flourishing of the individual and community, not the other way around. On one version of this conception, teachers are good teachers to the extent that they nurture the flourishing of the individual and the school community, not to the extent that they process children in the service of a globalised economy. The role of nurturing the flourishing of the other is a complex one, not easily amenable to formulaic prescription. While the political centre may seek to secure particular kinds of teachers who can demonstrate that they have hit the mark, this is no guarantee that we will have teachers who get the point and are, consequently, effective in promoting the flourishing of individual or community.

It is here, once again, that the liminal metaphor may be of some assistance. It is interesting to note that our images of the efficacious teacher

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lie outside the categorisations of benchmarks or competences and are to do with the person of the teacher. Capacities and competences, skills and abilities, insight and understanding are all embodied in the particular. In literary and cinematic culture, the iconic teacher is not the efficient bureaucrat or the technically competent but the interesting, exciting and slightly dangerous inspirer of students. From *Dangerous Minds* to *Dead Poet's Society* to *Goodbye Mr. Chips*, the pattern of someone who, above all else, cares passionately about the students, and through them about the world is paramount. Despite significant differences in the narrative and even in the person of the hero they all share this passion for the world. It may well be argued these are not real-world teachers who have to live with the banality of the everyday in education but are mythological emanations of some sort of ideal state.[6] But, it is in harbouring precisely such ideals that we reflect some kind of desire for the state of affairs embodied by them. Moreover, as Day's (1999) researches show, it is precisely this kind of passionate care for student and world that is most likely to motivate students themselves. If students were asked to choose between Socrates and Plato, I suspect most would opt for Socrates.

The Trickster as a Liminal Metaphor

As we have seen, the model of the imagined teacher, articulated in and through the political centre, may be summarised as referring to a competent, technically proficient, fairly controlled purveyor of the dominant themes and motifs of policy that, in a closure of the circle, have their origins in the political and economic centre. As the discursive climate at the centre has closed down, so too has the imagined teacher. Imagination and creativity are desired traits to the extent that they contribute to the achievement of the centrally stipulated targets. But this model of human endeavour is rooted in a myth; one that is so deeply entrenched in our thought that it has become part of who and what we are and is barely accessible to investigation and analysis. It is the myth of the arithmetic, which Castoriadis (1997)[7] saw had come to be treated in our culture as ontologically originary, masquerading as the foundational principle upon which the existence of rational society and its institutions is predicated. But there may be other myths upon which we can draw to inform our conception of the teacher, which are less prone to the discursive closures of the centre.

With some caution, I wish to propose a different and more ancient way of looking at the moral and social role of the teacher and the processes of education in which she is involved. This alternative perspective draws on

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older, more imaginative and complex sources of meaning than the latest Gallup poll or the latest adjusted performance indicator. It is the figure of the trickster, possibly the oldest and probably the most ubiquitous of all mythic figures. Before going on to say something about the trickster as a metaphor for the teacher, I wish to briefly outline some of the traits of the trickster to better understand how he might perform such a role.

As Leeming and Page (1996), among others, point out, it is very likely that the trickster is the most significant and the earliest mask of God. Rooted in the Palaeolithic era, his human-animal image is to be found in numerous places around the world, most famously in the caves at Lascaux. In different cultures he assumes quite different guises. In Northern Europe, he is Loki; in India, he is Krishna among the maidens; for the Greeks, he manifests himself as Hermes and Prometheus; for the Native Americans of the Pacific Northwest, he is Raven; for the Winnebago, Hopi and Navajo (among others), Coyote; for the Cherokee, the Bear-shaman; and for Polynesians, he is Maui. It is not my purpose here to provide an exhaustive list of his myriad epiphanies or indeed to recount the vast array of mythic stories attached to him. There are plenty of other sources for that (see Eliot 1990; Hynes and Doty 1993; Hyde 1999). Instead, I wish to draw some lessons from the trickster in order to develop the persona as an appropriate and sustainable metaphor for the teacher, as one who occupies a liminal (ambiguous) space in late-industrial culture. For sure, in many cultures the trickster is seen as an expression of darkness; one who plays wicked tricks on humans, drawing them into his confidence only to ensnare or abuse them. As Coyote he is often seen as a wily animal who, in being too smart for his own good, generally comes unstuck. He may still be found in this guise in the many extant popular stories for children.[8] As Iktome (the spider), or Maui, or Coyote himself, he is sexually promiscuous, prepared to have intercourse under any circumstances and pretty much with anyone. From a psychological perspective, Henderson argues that "The trickster cycle corresponds to the earliest and least developed period of life. Trickster is a figure whose physical appetites dominate his behaviour; he has the mentality of an infant. Lacking any purpose beyond the gratification of his primary needs, he is cruel, cynical and unfeeling" (Henderson 1964, 112). It is in this, his most rudimentary form, that Jung expressly sees "Trickster" as an archetypal psychic structure. He suggests that,

> In picaresque tales, in carnivals and revels, in magic rites of healing, in man's religious fears and exaltations, this phantom of the Trickster haunts the mythology of all ages, sometimes in quite unmistakable form, sometimes in strangely modulated guise. He is obviously a "psychologem," an archetypal psychic structure of extreme antiquity. In his clearest manifestations he is a faithful reflection of an

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> absolutely undifferentiated human consciousness, corresponding to a psyche that has hardly left the animal level. (Jung 1972, 140)

Through history this reification of the dark, amoral self gradually gives way to a more ordered, grown-up being. As Jung goes on to argue, "civilised man has forgotten the Trickster" (ibid, 147), having buried him in his unconscious. He has become a shadow figure who, just now and again, spills over in late-industrial mass society. Jung goes on to claim that Trickster is never very far way and may be glimpsed in all kinds of still-maintained cultural and social rituals. Now, this may or may not be the case but there certainly is a sense in which the trickster will not go away, representing, as he does, a set of complex cultural relations that may well have their genesis in perceptions of power and control.

Having regarded Jung's view as possibly too limiting, Campbell adopted a slightly different approach to Trickster. He argued that Trickster is not only the dark, demonic figure of Jung's analysis—one who has gradually been overwritten to obscure or obliterate his anarchic and chaotic persona—but, "in the Palaeolithic sphere out of which [he] originates, he was the archetype of the hero, the giver of all great boons—the fire-bringer and the teacher of mankind" (Campbell 1969, 274). This does not imply that he does not subscribe to the idea that Trickster is a symptom of the unconscious; indeed, in this and in much else he agrees with Jung (Campbell 1949 and 1993, 257). However, he places more emphasis on the creative dimensions of the trickster than Jung. This, however, doesn't result in the erasure of the disruptive, contesting, slightly dangerous elements. These too have to be retained, though Campbell does suggest that Christianity's concern with good and evil has had some displacement effect on the creative energy embodied in the trickster (see also Davidson, 1964). As much as he is a thief and a clown, trickster is importantly also a creator and destroyer. In Greek mythology, Russo (1997) argues, both Hermes and Prometheus are the products of extensive rewriting that has erased the more disconcerting elements of the trickster. In extant Greek mythological records, Prometheus and Hermes, the two divine trickster-figures, lack the emphatically trouble-making character seen in the caprice of Loki or Wakdjunkaga[9]. The Greek attitude towards both is consistently positive. Prometheus "is a great founder of culture, the bringer of fire and subsequent technologies, whose trickiness is exercised at the expense of Zeus and on behalf of human kind" (ibid, 243). It was he, whom Shelley thought to single out, over any other mythical character, including Satan, because of "his courage and majesty, and firm and patient opposition to omnipotent force" (Shelley 1967, 205). In *Prometheus Unbound,* Shelley echoes Prometheus' own words (Aeschylus

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1961, Lines 199–263). His contribution to humankind is summed up in the voice of the chorus of spirits who have lately,

> Come from the mind of human kind
> Which was late so dusk, and obscene, and blind
> [but] Now 'tis an ocean of clear emotion
> A heaven of serene and mighty motion
>
> (Shelley 1967, 256)

Here, Shelley is recognising Prometheus' role as a historicised force of social transformation. While manifesting differences from Prometheus, Hermes too offers much to our self-understanding. He is, after all, not just the ferryman but also the god of the threshold or limen and, as Pelton observes, the trickster is above all a symbol of both the man and the liminal state itself, which is a "source of recreative power" (1980, 35). Whatever might be the truth of the trickster, in these Greek gods he has certainly been softened, but if so, particularly in the case of Prometheus, it is at the service of an increasingly expansive vision of human being. The trickster then represents myriad and powerful forces of creative energy and, with some facility. It is these refractions of Trickster identity that point to the possibility of seeing him as a metaphor, which is particularly helpful in developing a liminal conception of the teacher.

So far I have suggested that both schools and teachers are embodiments of contradictory and ambiguous attitudes in the polity more generally, and that the increasing attempts to define and tie down the practices and persona of the teacher reflect a deep-seated unease with the antinomian potential of schools and education. This anxiety, of course, comes increasingly to the fore as the discourse of corporation and state becomes ever more closely and carefully articulated. After all, as the financial pundits are forever telling us at the close of the evening news programme, the markets do not like uncertainty!

I have so far reflected briefly on the genealogy of the trickster as one who, while embodying the dark side of human nature, also offers a freshness, energy and, following Prometheus, the gift of hope to human beings. In the next section I should like to develop this theme a little further through a brief excurses into trickster emanations in Celtic literature. Emanations, where the trickster also embodies the Bakhtinian (Bakhtin 1968)[10] themes of laughter, absurdity, parody, comedy and social inversion as well as the festive, imaginative and adversarial powers of great antiquity (Cox 1969, 7–11; see also Welsford 1935). In this, tricksters are both progenitors and embodiments of the carnivalesque.[11] It is precisely these qualities that make the trickster

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eminently suitable as a liminal metaphor for the teacher. If our attitudes to education, schooling and the teacher are subject to the kinds of contradictions reflected upon at the opening of this chapter, then it is possible that the trickster may help to surface those ambiguities and use them creatively to energise the discursive potential (and arguably, end) of education.

The Celtic Trickster as Teacher

The trickster motif has remained both an enduring and resilient motif in Celtic culture and literature up to the present time. This may be because the Celts were more primitive than other Europeans. After all, Jung suggests, "outwardly people are more or less civilised, but inwardly they are still primitives. Something in man is profoundly disinclined to give up his beginnings, and something else believes it has long since got beyond that" (1972, 149). Given that until very recently, Celts, particularly the Irish, were more religious than other Europeans it might be suggested that the enduring interest and expressions of the liminal is a function of their primitive religiosity. However, such a connection is fairly unlikely given that; first, the inside-outside dichotomy is itself illusory; and second, there are long-established and complex literary and cultural traditions in the worlds of the Celts. Moreover, the complex history of the struggle between trickster motifs and emanations, and particular forms of Christianity going back through the rise of Jansenism to the counter-Reformation, and beyond would suggest quite different reasons for his durability. It is perhaps more reasonable to ascribe his resilience in Celtic culture and literature to a liminal response to the history of cultural subjection to England. Here the trickster motif may be seen as a source of power and resistance, facilitating the disengagement from those primary social signifiers seen to derive from English cultural supremacy. In both Scotland and Ireland this response was expressed in the persistence and the renewal of ancient, pre-Christian trickster traditions and stories with their extensive associations with liminality, borderlands and unexpected change (Muldoon 2000, Ch.1).[12] So it is that trickster lore continues to this day to exercise a powerful influence in the texts and the attitudes of the Celtic peoples of Scotland and Ireland; an influence that may be considered both seminal and standard in the production of regional and national identity, while simultaneously laying such potentially reified categories open to the voices of multicultural diversity and difference.

A virtual pantheon of Celtic writers, ancient and modern, stands as the embodiment of the trickster principle of opposition to discursive closure and its attendant practices. These include archaic culture heroes, such as Merlin,

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Sweeney and Taliesin, through to key modernist and later writers, such as Flann O'Brien, Seamus Heaney, Paul Muldoon, Hugh MacDiarmid and Edwin Morgan. These modern writers embody that perennial ambiguity that exists between the centre and the periphery. In both their work and their own positions as literary figures they articulate the trickster myth within an overarching concern with the language of ambiguity. Thus are writers and texts woven together into a kind of tapestry of the trickster. In this sense, it is as meaningless to ask whether one is primarily interested in the texts or in the writer as a trickster, as it is to ask whether one is more interested in the person of Joyce than that of Bloom or Daedelus.

The roots of the specifically Celtic trickster figure, and the sources of his continuing influence, lie in the complex series of cultural and linguistic negotiations through which Celtic identity has been formed in Scotland and Ireland from ancient times down to the modern era. The transactions between the Celtic peoples, and their ambivalent relationship with their populous and dominant neighbour, England, have made the Atlantic archipelago a seemingly classic setting for the enactment of the centre-periphery model of national and ethnic self-definition (Hay 1968; Burke 1992). However, while the notion of a particular Celtic conscious may, on occasion, appear a little historically contrived, it is nevertheless clear that, even in an imagined form, it has given rise to alternative and culturally situated readings of history, power and identity. For the Celtic peoples of Scotland and Ireland, the continuing ambiguity of their relations with England has been felt most keenly at the level of language. The colonial impact of English imperialism is most immediately obvious in the fact that English is the main language of both Scotland and Ireland, pushing the aboriginal Gaelic tongues of each country into regional enclaves. In both Scotland and Ireland, nonetheless, separate and distinctive educational systems have flourished for centuries as vital compensating forces in the protection of national prestige and cultural difference. These systems have roots running deep into the medieval origins of each nation, and they are widely recognised as carrying within them cultural memories that antedate English influence and that have served as invaluable resources in the resistance to English hegemony. Education in Scotland and Ireland can therefore legitimately be said to face both ways: the withering of native languages in the face of the ubiquity of English language and culture is balanced by the deliberate and self-conscious preservation of a living literary heritage with atavistic sources in the indigenous folk and mythological traditions. The trickster has been an enduring presence in the desire to maintain a different sense of identity and self. Equally, those who would attempt to domesticate culture and identity have felt his presence as an

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eruptive and disquieting figure at the margins, constantly pressing them towards an imagined authenticity.

In the protomyth of the Celtic trickster, a doomed wild man or poet figure is driven mad by the catastrophic outcome of a huge battle to which he is witness. Overwhelmed by grief and loss, the poet flees to the woods, discarding the raiment and trappings of civilisation, abandoning rational discourse and classical utterance, and taking upon himself the mantle of the theriomorphic shaman (O'Riain 1972). From his forest habitat, the Wild Man assumes the status of an oracle or prophet, scorning the values of society and vilifying the deeds and the motives of the rich and powerful. In the legends that surround the British Saint Kentigern, or Mungo (Patron Saint and first Bishop of Glasgow), the Wild Man is Lailoken or Myrddin (a forerunner of the wizard Merlin of Arthurian romance). He rails against the hypocrisies and immorality of the kings and nobles whom Kentigern seeks to convert. He interrupts Kentigern's services by sitting on a nearby rock and uttering obscure prophecies. He repines bitterly at his own condition, yet pleads with the saint to receive the Blessed Sacrament. Moved by pity, Kentigern recognises the deep bond of brotherhood that exists between saint and seer, and finally consents to reconcile Lailoken to the Church (Jarman 1991).

In the Irish version of the story, the *Buile Suibhne* (*Frenzy of Sweeney*), the Wild Man suffers periodic recurrences of his battle-panic and at these moments can fly like a bird among the treetops. Seamus Heaney, in the preface to his own rendition of the tale, celebrates its trans-Celtic provenance and sees Sweeney in universal terms as "a figure of the artist, displaced, guilty, assuaging himself by his utterance...an aspect of the quarrel between free creative imagination and the constraints of religious, political and domestic obligation." (1983, 2)

> I am Sweeney, the whinger,
> the scuttler in the valley.
> But call me, instead,
> peak-pate, Stag-head
>
> Forever mendicant,
> my rags all frayed and scanty,
> high in the mountains
> like a crazed, frost-bitten sentry.
>
> (Heaney 1983, 2)

Heaney's account of the Sweeney myth makes explicit the identification of trickster and poet which is such a marked theme of the Celtic heritage. The

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Wild Man's antisocial marginalisation has profound implications for the language of the poetic voice. In the conditions of Celtic self-understanding, the poet is institutionally alienated from, yet dependent on, his society. His status as prophet and oracle accords him a quasi-religious respect, but his scandalous behaviour and contumely induce embarrassment and discomfort in his listeners because they imply "the suggestion that any particular ordering of experience may be arbitrary and subjective" (Douglas 1968, 365).

This tradition of the literary figure as trickster in Irish culture surfaces again in the twentieth century, and its outworkings and implications emerge in the writings of James Joyce, Flann O'Brien, Seamus Heaney and Paul Muldoon. Flann O'Brien, the comic novelist and columnist with *The Irish Times* from the 1940s to the mid-1960s, embodies a singularly Celtic account of the notion of the literary trickster in both his own persona and in his writings. Constantly oscillating between his Gaelic and English identities,[13] O'Brien embodied the foundational principle of the trickster—as one who confounds the listener/reader, moving between different life-worlds and enabling them to be interwoven into new patterns so as to chastise as well as inform each other. He also switches between the language of the "oppressed" and that of the "oppressor." Sometimes a work will be penned in Gaelic, sometimes in English and sometimes the same text will draw on both, trafficking between the two. In a comic version of Joyce, O'Brien changes idiom and subject, moving seamlessly from the aphorisms of the vernacular to a comment on Keats or Goethe. So, in one of his columns in *The Irish Times* he opens with an extract from Keats' sonnet on the four seasons of man:

> [H]e has his summer, when luxuriously
> Spring's honeyed end of youthful thought he loves
> To ruminate, and by such dreaming nigh
> Is the nearest unto heaven; quiet coves
> His soul has in its Autumn, when his wings
> His furleth close.
>
> (Keats *The Human Seasons*, 1998 232)

Having led his reader into the heart of English Romanticism, O'Brien immediately turns Keats' meditation on its head through the jibe that for Keats, "This is largely hearsay or guess work…[given that he] dies when he was a boy" (na Gopaleen 1968, 80). He then goes on to rework the central motifs of the poem, opining that,

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> There is nothing I like better than an evening with a few quiet coves in the dimmer corner of a pub, murmuring together in friendship the judgements of our mature minds. As regards furling my wings close, that is also true enough. To spend a whole bob or a tanner in one go entails suffering. My little pension is woefully inelastic. A wing or two saved in ordering porter instead of stout is not to be despised. A borrowed match, a cadged filling of the pipe, all small things mount mightily in a year. (ibid)

His interlocutors in this, as in many other pieces, are "the plain people of Ireland," a description that embodies more than a hint of irony. Elsewhere, O'Brien's wit and parody serve to upbraid, in turn, the English, the intellectuals of Ireland, those who would deem themselves cultured, and in the case of the Irish, those who see themselves as morally, politically and culturally superior—the patriots.[14]

At the time of O'Brien's most productive work, Ireland was in the throes of shaking off its colonial past and emerging as a modern liberal democracy (albeit one that embraced a vestigial theocracy). In asserting its post-colonial identity it was busily establishing and reinforcing the iconographic status of all those patriots who traced and expressed their fealty to an image of Ireland that ran back through the rebellions and revolutionaries of 1916 and 1798, the Presbyterian Enlightenment figures of the late-eighteenth century, the heroic deeds of Brian Boru in the middle ages—to the mythic heroes of the Red Branch Knights and Cuchulainn himself. It was, by and large, not a good time to call into question Ireland's image of itself. The idea that there should, or even could be any ambiguity surrounding Celtic (in this case, Gaelic) identity would not only not have been much in evidence but would have been regarded with complete opprobrium in the public spaces. Attacks on the enemy across the Irish Sea were not in short supply and, while O'Brien was not shy about directing his withering gaze towards the English, they were not the objects of his scribing. The trickster's play is primarily directed at his own traditions and culture, and not at that of the outsider or enemy. O'Brien's tricksterishness was to prove no exception to the general trend. His liminal persona is worked out, and requires, to be understood in the context of specifically Irish notions of national identity and moral superiority, identity and superiority that arose out of that most passive of "virtues": being oppressed. Nowhere in O'Brien's work or biography is the transformative quality of the inside/outside more apparent than in *An Béal Bocht*[15], first penned in 1941. All the shibboleths of Irishness are here turned on their head: the innocent potato, the mainstay of the Irish (folkloric) diet is utterly transformed into the food of the gods, which, in this particular instance, happen to be the pigs who are regarded as more prized than the humans. The pigs inhabit not just the house but, more importantly, the spot in front of the fire! Even more tellingly, O'Brien—originally under the na Gopaleen *nom de*

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plume—parodies the great revivalists of the Irish language and culture; those who see themselves as "Gaels" on a moral crusade to restore Irishness and its language as the means by which they can overcome the oppression of being forced to speak in English. So at a Feis[16] in the west of Ireland, created by the eastern gentry, the self-appointed President delivers a stirring oration.

> Gaels! he said, it delights my Gaelic heart to be here today speaking Gaelic with you at this Gaelic feis in the centre of the Gaeltacht....We are all Gaelic Gaels of Gaelic lineage. He who is Gaelic will be Gaelic evermore. If we're truly Gaelic, we must constantly discuss the question of the Gaelic revival and the question of Gaelicism. There is no use in having Gaelic, if we converse in it on non-Gaelic topics...I don't think the Government is earnest about Gaelic, I don't think they are Gaelic at heart. (O'Brien 1973, 54)

O'Brien continues with this parody at some length, which, while amusing for the reader of the English translation, is much more potent in the original Gaelic. The verbose, self-appointed guardians of Gaelic heritage had, in truth, little enough in common with the residual native speakers. At, and immediately prior to the time O'Brien was writing, a virtual host of Gaelic biographies were being penned, the most famous of which was *An tOileánach*[17] by the Blasketman, Tomás Ó Criomhthain. O'Brien's *An Béal Bocht* is a deliberate parody of this genre, which tended to receive critical acclaim irrespective of its frequently limited literary merit. His scepticism was seen everywhere in this and a number of his other works, including *At Swim-Two-Birds.* It emerges again and again through his hijacking and distortion or repetition of a number of clichéd Irish proverbs and sayings, some of which are deployed by Ó Criomthain to reinforce the authentic provenance of his Islandman as the embodiment of the noble, rural, Gaelic and singular peasant Irishman. These included a quotation used on the title page of *An tOileánach. Ni beheidh ár leithéidi ann aŕis* (Our likes will never be again) (See Farnon, 1997) His choice of Gaelic as the medium of this particular novel is an integral feature of his tricksterish disposition. To use the internal modalities of cultural assertion as a way of critiquing the delinquent misappropriation of those very modalities is indeed a trick. This trick is even more pointed when it is realised that O'Brien thought Joyce wrong to have turned his back on his own Gaelic heritage in favour of classical sources as the mythological frame for *Ulysses* (Ó Hainle 1997).

It might be thought that O'Brien would be primarily interested in satirising the old enemy—the colonisers who had established and sustained the centre-periphery disequilibrium that had kept Irish-language custom and identity *beyond the pale*. But these were not his primary target. He was much more interested in resisting the hegemonising tendencies that can come in the wake of a cultural reassertion and political centring of myth so that myth

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itself, instead of offering a language of liberation can become an ensnarement. This somewhat provocative trope in his work finds resonances in recent indigenous historical scholarship in Scotland and Ireland that has cast doubt on the local applicability of the centre-periphery model by challenging accepted understandings of a shared, universalised Celtic consciousness (Pittock 1999). It has vigorously critiqued essentialist and historically continuous conceptions of the Celtic, drawing attention to a more contingent and constructed series of representations of the Celtic heritage, mediated by competing cultural and political ideologies.

Even in turning his eye inwards, O'Brien doesn't limit himself to the political and discursive closure that embraced the Irish language but extends his gaze to include attitudes to religion, sex and individuality. Irishness and Gaelic culture in the 1940s was largely synonymous with a particular rendering of Catholicism; to be authentically Irish was to be Catholic and, in consequence, to be dutiful and respectful of a Church that also claimed for itself a kind of originary status grounded in the pre-history myths of the *Fianna,* the Irish giant warriors and those other figures touched upon above. Given that Irish culture, language and history was mediated in the first half of the twentieth century by the Catholic clergy with their grip on the sexual politics of Ireland meant that O'Brien's gyrations were not held captive by his attention on the cultural revivalists but extended beyond to these other underlying, ecclesial influences. Even more, while his parody of Ó Criomthain's work (and that of other Irish cultural revivalists, such as Standish O'Grady) was relentless, he nevertheless admired him deeply (O'Hainle 1997, 36). It would be too easy to reduce O'Brien to a mere satirist who construed the Irish cultural revival as little more than cant.

The point at issue is not O'Brien's wit or satire, nor his literary or critical abilities, nor yet his inventive modernism, irrespective of the undoubted brilliance that he displayed in all of these. O'Brien falls truly into the Irish tradition of learned poet-fool and story teller: the *seanchaidhe*, or *shanachie* (Harrison 1989). The *seanchaidhe* is not just a storyteller, he is "an antiquary, historian or genealogist...one who traces relationships, [and is] versed in folklore" (Dinneen 1927, 1007). He draws upon the past to challenge the follies of the present. He stands as a foil to Rorty's (1999) claim that cultural heritage is no more than a bag of tricks. But, important as all this might be for pointing to him as a cultural critic, a voice on the margin, on its own it is insufficient. What distinguishes O'Brien is his existence, as Boston has it, as one who is "both outside the norms of society and at the same time somewhere very near the centre of human experience" (Boston 1974, 93). More than this even, he is one who loves his traditions but is prepared to turn them on their head to achieve the needed effect. He is

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capable of holding contrary opinions simultaneously. Those behind the Gaelic revival would never be able to castigate him as an outsider, nor would they be able to embrace him as one of us. Rather, O'Brien is in that long line of Irish poets, seers and teachers whose capacity to challenge and satirise the seats of power, whether they be king, priest or bureaucrat, is predicated upon their being deeply rooted in the exact same traditions upon which king, priest or bureaucrat build their own cathedra. He is unequivocally rooted in the anti-power stories of Ireland that go back to the pre-middle ages figure, Anier MacConglinne, and beyond. Both O'Brien and the narrators of his tales fall within the trickster tradition—that is, as "beneficent culture hero, ...clever deceiver, or the numskull" (Welsford 1935, 88–93). Indeed, both he and his tellers constantly weave in and out of these roles.

The Trickster as a Liminal Representation of the Teacher

At the opening of this chapter, I argued that the role and identity of teacher as both pedagogue and administrator has been increasingly subjected to the discursive closure that has absorbed education in particular, and conceptions of human flourishing in general. I have also sketched some of the ambiguous attitudes towards teachers in the wider polity; attitudes that are themselves, in part, refractions of adult anxieties about the potential unruliness of large numbers of adolescents and in part, a by-product of the discursive closure. Standing against this has been the articulation of the trickster as an oppositional metaphor to such closure. His force derives from a complex network of related dispositions that have both evolved in and been captured by the trickster over time and geography. Even those primitive palaeolithic incarnations have something to offer our understanding of the teacher as one who is charged with entering into and accompanying students in the transitional space of the school. Because of the peculiarly modern concerns with resisting ideological closure and willingness, nay desire, to live the life of ambiguity, the modern Celtic trickster is particularly useful in this regard. In this final section I wish to weave the trickster into a liminal conception of the teacher and her role. Admittedly, this is not a straightforward task since it may not be argued that the teacher, much less the head-teacher, can ignore the cultural expectations of the wider polity. Additionally, the teacher is not a poet or shaman but an educator. Against this, it should be remembered that what is being advocated is the cultivation of the liminal as a trope in education. There is no expectation that the teacher has to be a trickster all the time, or indeed that every teacher has to be a full-blown trickster. But the trickster, as a liminal expression of the educative possibilities of a

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discursively open liberal democracy, may offer a pathway that circumvents the closure of the markets while remaining faithful to broader considerations about human flourishing.

The trickster performs this task because, as Prometheus, he is prepared to stand against powerful elites. He embodies the human desire to have a way of accessing knowledge, wisdom and insight. He is an advocate for human advancement and flourishing in the face of Zeus' desire to keep humanity in a diminished state. Every now and then we should expect our teachers to stand for their students as human subjects and not as objects to be tested and prepared for a particular, monoglot expression of flourishing. As Hermes, the teacher-trickster is one who stands at the limen, at the doorway between the world of the politically and economically powerful and the world of the student in all her incarnations. He is, as I hope to demonstrate a little more in the next chapter, the one who can help and guide the student in her growth towards wisdom. Moreover, as Hermes is the patron and teacher of all the arts (including the sciences), so too is the schoolteacher. The teacher must share something of the Hermes-trickster's reverence for mystery (see Campbell 1949 and 1993, 73). In a culture that, despite the alleged religious fervour of many political leaders, has eschewed the desirability, or even existence of mystery, the liminality of the trickster is an important potential corrective.

As I suggested in the opening section, the role of the teacher is hedged with ambiguity. From a variety of quite disparate perspectives this ambiguity is not something to be resolved but lived with and once again, our metaphor may be seen as hermeneutically helpful. As a shape-shifter the teacher may move back and forth across the terrain of education, now supporting the status quo, now challenging it. As the student resolves one difficulty the teacher should excite her imagination with a new one. The teacher is a foil, playing with ideas as she journeys with her students. The teacher-trickster is constantly open to the new, while at the same time maintaining roots in her cultural history and traditions. Laughter may be deemed an important feature of the intellectually and personally robust classroom. The dual bequest of the Celtic trickster to modern Irish and Scottish literature is communicated most sharply in the traditions of comedy, underlining William Hynes' insight that "the Trickster's humour melds entertainment and education" (1993, 20). The teacher has to draw on this insight, most especially in a culture where entertainment itself has often been reduced to a cipher for consumption. To be a trickster-teacher is to embody a way of being a teacher where texts are opened to the unsettling influences and counter-readings of pleasure, joy, sexuality, ethnicity, embodiment and laughter; where new readings and innovative methodologies are sought at the edges of texts, where readers

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connect with cultural expressions in unexpected ways. Inhabiting the role of the trickster, the teacher harnesses the energies of childhood and adolescence not to deface established texts but to reanimate them pedagogically, attending to those areas of meaning and language choice that mainstream readings overlook or actively repress. The teacher opens zones of learning to the unorthodox, the prohibited interpretation, and the manipulation and recasting of texts into new and unprecedented forms. Clearly, the image fits best when applied to the teacher of personal and social education and the humanities, such as religious education, literature and the arts, but it is not their exclusive prerogative. Equally, the maths and science teacher may be expected to don the cloak of the trickster, to play with number, to imagine the absence of number, to open up different understandings of the way in which number shapes, and is used to shape, the way we look at ourselves. The connections between number, harmonics and the vibrations of the universe may, with the perspective of the trickster, open up new possibilities for play.

In following O'Brien, the trickster in the classroom is never merely an outcast figure, a high-minded maverick condemned to institutional incomprehension and intellectual martyrdom. Such a figure would fail to communicate with his audience while the authentic trickster revels in a surfeit of communication with his interlocutors. One has only to think of O'Brien's deep attachment to the very culture he is compelled to critique to see this at play. The teacher-trickster also has to have the capacity to connect the interior world of the student with the world of shared experience. In other words she stands in an in-between space. As one who inhabits such a liminal position the teacher must, for example, help students to subject the mainstays of democracy to constant scrutiny precisely in order to sustain and protect themselves and the world. In a world where the value systems of students appear to be different from those of their parents (but not as different as might often be claimed), the teacher has to be in touch with both, moving from one to the other and back again; shifting shape and offering a challenge to both worlds.

A Few Queries

There are a number of reasons why the trickster might be regarded as an unsuitable metaphor for the teacher in late-industrial society. First, it might be suggested that the teacher is not a poet and that it is a mistake to confuse her role with that of the mythic or poetic or trickster voice. Second, the

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discursive, somewhat unpredictable and at times downright mischievous character of the trickster makes it difficult to see how he could be a metaphor in the structured environment of the classroom. Third, some might see this metaphor as no distinctively different from that of the discursive contests as advocated by postmoderns or critical pedagogues. Finally, it may be argued that teaching is a professional (or similar) practice that is funded out of a public purse for public ends determined, according to liberal-democratic principles, by government. Rather than spend energy on re-imagining themselves as Trickster, teachers would be more usefully employed improving their skills base in order to enhance students' literary or arithmetic capabilities.

Let me briefly take each one of these in turn. It is true that the teacher is not the poet, nor should she be regarded as performing the same function, but she does have a poetic role in as much as poetry is concerned with the disclosure of the world. The teacher, through her craft no doubt, but more importantly through her person and disposition, facilitates this disclosure by giving voice to the myriad ways that human beings come to construe and make sense of the world. She facilitates her students in their naming of the world. Her voice may carry different inflections from those of the poet but they share overlapping intentions. To suggest anything less is to confuse education with training, and while training may be a perfectly noble activity it is not education. With regard to the second point, it may be argued that there are particular representations of and elements within the trickster myth that might seem inappropriate in the context of the classroom. Surely, one might say, we do not wish for teachers who are licentious and rapacious, we do not wish for teachers who are liars and cheats, even where they manage to make everything turn out okay. Clearly there are trickster figures, particularly in early cultures, who might not be seen as suitable "role models" or metaphors. The answer is both straightforward and complicated. Just as the metaphor of the liminal has an openness that can, on occasion, be somewhat disturbing and carry a "down side," so too with that of the trickster. But in both instances what we are concerned with is the development of open metaphors and that requires us to flirt a little with some of these difficulties.

As we have seen already there is always a liminal dimension to education, precisely because the school sits at the interstices of the privacy of the home and the world of public appearance. The interstitial always carries an element of the unpredictable. In any event, given that children in liberal democracies regularly encounter the shadow side of human being (in film, narrative, news, divorce, bereavement), then it would be tantamount to naivety to suggest that whatever metaphors we use for the teachers' role must

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draw only on those images and models untainted by the experience of living. Moreover, there is no suggestion that the teacher becomes the trickster per se. (After all, assiduously pursuing Flann O'Brien's path of "dying from the drink" is hardly to be recommended as a course of action for the average teacher!) In the way in which it has been used here metaphor is not syntagmatic—we are not replacing the term teacher with trickster, we are learning from the polyvalence of the trickster to inform our liminal conception of the teacher. It is more that the discursive closure around the role and identity of the teacher is in danger of squeezing out the excitement and perennial freshness of teaching as a naming of the world. The teacher-Trickster is a liminal metaphor and as such will always be at the threshold but, as with laughter and play, indeed with the liminal itself, it throws light on the teacher's role and engagements. Like the trickster, the teacher inhabits a borderland—in this instance between the world of adults and the world of children and adolescents; between the education of the self and preparation for public activity; between the ethically desirable and the reprehensible; between educating for a critical stance and education for social cohesion; and between world and school.

Finally, the image of the teacher-Trickster is a liminal one, and in its liminality there is no expectation that the classroom or school is likely to be turned into bedlam. It is rather that the teacher's disposition towards the openness of possibility is being nurtured through the application and embrasure of the metaphor. Here, O'Brien's relationship to the centre is instructive. Not only does he know and use the traditions of his culture—this would always be necessary if one wishes to turn such things on their head—he *loves* them. It is this passion for the world that gives him permission to upbraid those who would hijack and close it down. By simultaneously revering and reconfiguring both the dominant language and the other tongues and cultures with which it coexists, his work is a response to the pervasive presence of an historically conflicted linguistic culture, etched with a history of displacement and oppression. At a time when schooling is subjected to a similarly conflicted culture, the teacher has to move back and forth between the imperatives of government and corporations on the one hand and the claims of students on the other to access a suitably complex education. In having to meet the marks set by government, the teacher partakes in the hegemony of schooling. In inverting, challenging and, here and there, displaying a scurrilous distaste for conformity, she partakes in the heteronomy of the world. To see the teacher as a permanent trickster would not only be self-defeating, it would be to miss the point.

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Conclusion

This chapter has offered a discursively enhanced and rather more complex understanding of the teacher's role and occupational persona. Such an understanding mirrors the increasingly complex and diffuse engagements and experiences of late-industrial society. Of course, it can be argued that the trickster is predestined by his own nature to sit uncomfortably at the edges of educational acceptance in even the most utopian of contexts. For him to be comfortably recuperated by such a mainstream institution of cultural authority would represent an abrogation of everything we have come to see him embody. To find ways of inhabiting the zone of ambiguity is one of the central challenges for the teacher of literature or religion, moral or personal development, art or science. But it would be a mistake to think that many teachers, even headteachers and principals, do not already endorse tricksterish elements in their own engagements. Many spend much energy on finding ways of ameliorating the effects of discursive closure and government fiat in so far as they think these harmful. Many others develop pedagogies that soften the arithmetic imperatives of the technicist, competence-driven culture within which teachers' role, identity and occupational practices are increasingly framed. In any event, as I suggested at the beginning of this chapter, discussions of the status and occupational nature of the teacher already locates her in zones of ambiguity. Indeed, in her exploration of Lévi-Strauss' work with the Tsimshian people of the northernmost part of the Pacific Northwest, Mary Douglas offers a telling insight into the world of the trickster myth that could hardly be more apposite for the teacher.

> On the assumption that it is of the nature of myth to mediate contradictions, the method of analysis must proceed by distinguishing the oppositions and the mediating elements. And it follows too that the function of myth is to portray the contradictions in the basic premises of the culture. The same goes for the relation of myth to social reality. The myth is a contemplation of the unsatisfactory which after all composes social life. (1967, 52)

In education, the trickster myth may be seen in precisely this light, as a myth-metaphor that portrays the basic contradictions in our social attitudes to teachers and, at the same time, enables us to both contemplate and live with such contradiction.

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Notes

1. In Britain this scrutiny has been manifest not only in performance-related target setting but also in the accelerating predilection for suing doctors, lawyers, social workers and teachers. In those instances where someone dies, or fails to get what they wanted, or feels that they have been subject to abuse. Even for those who have never heard of Foucault, expertise is increasingly subject to certain scepticism.
2. In using teacher here I am aware that there are other kinds of teacher in higher/further education, but these constitute a quite different category.
3. For after all, in England and Wales a Teacher Training Authority controls access to and control of the approval and inspection of courses for teaching.
4. For further testament to the ubiquity of the notion of skills, targets and competences together with the almost complete absence of any reference to theoretical foundations, it is worth perusing the Teacher Training Agency's website: www.canteach.gov.uk.
5. See earlier comments on Winch's discussion on the moral desirability of education for work.
6. The rather prosaic and mundane motivations of teachers are revealed in the extensive Mori survey commissioned by the General Teaching Council of England and Wales, concerning teacher attitudes carried out in November 2002. Asked to list three factors that led them into a career in teaching, 62 percent said that they "just fell into it," and 48 percent, that they failed to achieve the grades they wanted for the course they wanted. In response to the request that they list three reasons why they remain in the profession, only 3 percent said it was because it afforded them professional autonomy. It would be interesting to compare such responses to other occupations, such as medicine, pharmacy, law, financial services and so on.
7. For Castoriadis the arithmetic is myth because it fundamentally shapes the way in which human societies look at themselves, their goals and their existence. "There is," he says, "no society without arithmetic. There is no society without myth. In today's society, arithmetic is, of course one of the main myths. There is not and cannot be a 'rational' basis for the domination of quantification in society. Quantification is merely the expression of one of its dominant imaginary significations" (1977, 11). For a more extensive discussion of Castoriadis' views and a different perspective on some of these ideas, see Conroy and Davis 2002.
8. For entertaining and apposite examples of the enduring popularity of the trickster as protagonist in children's stories, see Gerald McDermott's series of trickster tales, published by Voyager/Harcourt Inc.
9. The Winnebago Trickster.
10. In Rabelais and his World, Mikhail Bakhtin has carefully developed the themes of the carnivalesque and humour as central motifs in medieval culture and polity. These he believed represented sites of legitimated resistance to the hegemonising tendencies of the ruling classes.
11. There are of course a variety of positions on the socio-psychological and religious functions of the carnivalesque (of which the trickster, as we have

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intimated here, is one manifestation). Bahktin promotes the existence of the carnivalesque as an intimation of the deeply rooted need for subversion and inversion. Others such as Terry Eagleton maintain that these figures, plays and performances serve only to reinforce the ethico-religious and socio-political status quo. In her study, "Parody in the Middle Ages," Bayless (1996) suggests that recent anthropological studies point to the legitimacy of both conclusions and that the important determinative factors are time and place.

12. In his fascinating set of lectures, Paul Muldoon discloses the transformative and liminal qualities of Irish mythico-literary figures going back to the reputedly first Irish poet, Amergin. In his discussion of a poem by William Allingham that tells the story of an eviction (an everyday event in Ireland and Scotland throughout the nineteenth century), he sees in the figure of the old man being evicted "the image of a critically positioned figure, a figure who is neither here nor there, at some notional interface [who] may be traced back beyond the mid-nineteenth-century Ireland...to some deep-seated sense of liminality that was, and is, central to the Irish psyche" (Muldoon 2000, 8). In his own poetic works such as *Hay*, (1998) Muldoon is himself the embodiment of the Trickster, playing with, inverting and changing traditional forms and the relation of himself as author to these forms.
13. Flann O'Brien is one of two pseudonyms of the Northern Irish modernist writer and columnist, Brian O'Nolan. His other is Myles Na Gopaleen.
14. Interestingly, a term given a new valence in the light of Martin Scorsese's film, Gangs of New York.
15. "The Poor Mouth."
16. The Islandman.
17. Again, further detail about the complexity of the centre-periphery relations in Great Britain and Ireland is to be found in Conroy and Davis (2002).

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